

Action Research and Differentiating Reading Instruction in Mississippi:
Fourth-Grade Students' Reading Success

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Introduction

Wyn Mims was a student of Jeannie Lockley's when Lockley was teaching an introductory research class for a master's degree program in the School of Education at William Carey University (WCU) located in south Mississippi. At that time Mims was working towards obtaining her master's degree in reading. Students in that introductory research class at WCU were required to develop a research proposal and were asked to choose a question they really wanted to explore. Mims was teaching fourth grade and found reading was still an issue for far too many of her students. Mims decided to research a reading intervention and write a proposal based on her literature review. Students at WCU who are at the master's level in education are not expected to actually collect data and write results. WCU is on a trimester system, and the time allotted in a trimester is simply too limited to actually collect data and write results. It was a surprise for Lockley when Mims actually implemented the reading intervention Mims discovered during the literature review process, and that Author1 actually had collected data.

Logically, having a belief in action research is the first step to actually beginning implementing action research in a general education classroom. Action research is one topic covered in the research course taught at the master's level at WCU. Students who work on their specialist degrees at WCU actually conduct research, collect data, and write results, but master's level students are required to write only a proposal. Mims, even though she was a master's level student, went beyond what was academically required for the master's level research course. Mims believed in the action research process taught in the course and acted on it.

The overall purpose for Mims was to examine the effects of differentiating reading instruction on reading comprehension for her fourth-grade students. By writing about how a master-level student who was also a fourth-grade teacher actually believed in and utilized action

research, an overt and positive example is provided in support of teachers using action research in a general education classroom. By writing about Mims' utilization of making data-driven decisions and utilizing differentiated reading interventions in working with her students on reading, a specific example is provided that action research is doable for teachers in the classroom. Teachers engaging in action research can be quite useful to not only teachers, but to those people really most important, the students in the classrooms.

Stringer (2008) wrote, "When teachers are asked to do action research in their classrooms, their response is likely to be a combination of surprise, disbelief, and/or wariness" (p. 1). Action research is a way for teachers to examine their practices in the classroom as being effective or not (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012). Utilizing action research is "feedback" for teachers. Johnson (2008) supported that action research helps teachers to be better decision makers. Action research can be used to support continuing along a certain path if what the teacher is doing is effective. Action research can be used to support that what a teacher is doing in the classroom may be ineffective and that another avenue should be considered. Teachers should be making data-driven decisions in the classroom. Making data-driven decisions provides evidence of best practice. Action research is a type of research teachers can use to provide evidence to support or refute interventions utilized in the classroom in order for teachers to engage in best practices, with an end result of improved student learning.

McNiff and Whitehead (2010) provided a list of characteristics of action research and explained how action research is different from traditional research (p. 17). An important distinction between action research and traditional research is the fact that action research is practice based in order to help teachers improve their decision-making skills in the classroom while working with their students in order to improve student learning. Action research is a way

teachers can collaborate with one another in order to hold each other accountable in their profession. This accountability will hopefully “...contribute to social and cultural transformation” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010, p. 17), a transformation that will hopefully lead to long-term improvements for students.

Mims' Fourth-Grade Differentiating Reading Method

Mims' Purpose, Fourth Grade Setting, and Students

The purpose of Mims' action research was to examine the effect of differentiating reading instruction on reading levels for her fourth-grade students. Data were obtained from an elementary school in the southeastern area of Mississippi. All pertinent permissions were obtained. The school at that time was comprised of 3,872 third and fourth grade students. The demographics of the entire district at the time intervention was implemented and data collected were as follows: 48% female and 52% male, 13% African American, 85% Caucasian, 1.5% Hispanic, 0.59% Asian, 0.08% Native American, and approximately 35.7% of the district's students were eligible to receive free lunch. The district had received a Level 5 (Superior Performing – the top rating) from 2002 up to when data were collected.

The students were fourth graders and the demographics for the classrooms were similar to the district-wide population demographics. Data were collected in two heterogeneously mixed classrooms. Class 1 had 26 participants (15 girls and 11 boys) with 21 Caucasian students, 4 African American students and 1 Asian student. This was a general education classroom with no children in a response-to-intervention (RtI) model or who had individualized education programs (IEPs) who were in special education.

Class 2 had 25 participants (14 boys and 11 girls) with 18 Caucasian students, 4 African American students, 2 Hispanic students and 1 Native-American student. This class was an

inclusion classroom. There were students who were in the RtI model who required additional interventions and students who had IEPs because they were in special education. There were also children in this classroom who were neither in RtI or in special education.

Intervention: Differentiated teaching/Guided Reading

Students in the inclusion classroom were preassessed for learning preferences and content knowledge. Based on those results, individualized and grouped plans were developed for students. Instruction was differentiated based on those results. Some students worked in groups, alone, or one-on-one with the teacher. Students were consistently monitored by the teacher and instruction adjusted based on monitoring.

Fourth Grade Assessment

An assessment that was used was the STAR Reading Assessment. Results (group means only) from STAR Reading Growth Assessment were used for analysis. Norm-referenced scores were used. STAR Reading Assessments were developed by Renaissance Learning, Inc. (Renaissance Learning, Inc., 2007). STAR Reading Assessment is used to examine comprehension in order to examine students' reading growth. There were 25 multiple-choice questions per assessment. Students read grade specific paragraphs that were developed from children's literature. For fourth grade, split-half reliability is .90, test-retest reliability was .85, and alternate-forms reliability was .87. Average concurrent validity for fourth grade was .80 (Renaissance Learning, Inc., 2007).

Procedure and Findings

Mims found that after assessing each of her students using STAR Reading pretest scores for comprehension levels and teacher one-on-one oral reading fluency words read correctly per minute (WRCPM) using a beginning fourth-grade level passage at the beginning of the year that

she had students who were reading with comprehension issues and below the beginning of the fourth grade level. In Class 1, 32% of those students read below the required 100 words correctly read per minute (WCRPM) and comprehended at least one grade below fourth-grade level. There were 84% students in Class 2, which was an inclusion classroom. Six of the students in Class 2 were receiving special educational services. Five had reading disabilities and one was eligible based on a physical exceptionality.

Mims set a goal for each of the students to be reading on grade level by the end of the year and acknowledged that this goal would require much effort from her and her students. In order for the students to make large strides in reading comprehension, she had to focus on reading fluency in every lesson (Brand & Brand, 2006). Because of this immense need, Mims immediately began implementing reading fluency strategies into her teaching because she felt from her research that fluency was key to reading comprehension (Brand & Brand, 2006).

It was in Class 2 where Mims heavily focused on implementing reading fluency into every lesson, but students who met criteria for differentiation in Class 1 and Class 2 received differentiated instruction (DI). As part of differentiating reading interventions, Mims assessed monthly, tracked student reading fluency progress, and had students monitor their progress by coloring in graphs, and then those students would set a goal for the next month. Students were to read with an adult from their household each night of the school week. Those adults were asked to initial the student's reading. Those adults were also asked to provide Mims with feedback about any struggles or successes they witnessed when working with their child. Struggling readers practiced learning unfamiliar words, and any struggles adults in the home witnessed were individually addressed by Mims at school when the students were in class.

Mims began to keep a running record of monthly assessments for all students' reading

fluency by using an on-grade level passage. Charting with students was done in order to provide feedback for student involvement in their reading journey (Bailey & Heritage, 2008). As the students colored in their graphs, the students began to challenge themselves to improve for the next month.

The students reading below the required CWRPM were responsible for reading a fluency passage to an adult in their household for the rest of the week (Elish-Piper, 2010). On Fridays, an additional fluency assessment was given to students who were lower than others in the class to show those students that if they practiced unfamiliar words that they could make reading easier for themselves and increase their comprehension (Bailey & Heritage, 2008).

Each Monday for the rest of the month, the students with lower fluency scores took a reading passage home to practice reading nightly with their parents (Elish-Piper, 2010). Reading fluency scores were based on questions asked after reading a 100-word passage as part of the data collection process. The parents were asked to initial the reading passage after listening to their child read, and the parents were asked to comment on any struggles or successes their child experienced while reading to the parent. At the beginning of the next month, another on-grade level passage was administered to all students in the classroom and scored.

After only three months, all students had more than doubled STAR test results for comprehending on or almost on grade level text. Class 2, the inclusion classroom, grade level in reading comprehension grew from 2.3 to 3.6 (grade equivalency), and the other class improved from 4.3 to 5.2.

The students' fluency had also improved with less than half the student's requiring additional weekly assessments. Once a student was caught up with the rest of the class in terms of reading level, the specific reading intervention for that child was stopped and that student was

then moved back into the general reading instruction for the class. General reading instruction for the class was also differentiated, but not to the same extent as for those who needed more individualized attention (O'Meara, 2011; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2007; Tomlinson, 2001). The school where data were collected utilized a RtI process, and the school utilized a Teacher Support Team (TST) to implement and monitor the RtI process that is comprised of three tiers of instruction. On the first level of instruction, teachers were expected to utilize DI in general classroom practices, but teachers were also expected to provide additional help to students who were struggling academically by providing individualized attention (O'Meara, 2011; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2007; Tomlinson, 2001). Mims went above and beyond what was expected from the RtI process and folded in interventions she had learned about in her master's level courses.

Discussion

Students' results provided the students with the empirical support the notion that the more one reads, the better one reads (Elish-Piper, 2010; Bailey & Heritage, 2008; Brand & Brand, 2006). The students were able to visually follow their increased progress in both reading level (CWRPM) and comprehension based on correct answers to comprehension questions from 100-word passages (Yildiz, Yildirim, Ates, & Centinkaya, 2009; Brand & Brand, 2006). These students learned that if they put forth the effort to read, they would continue to read even better.

There is no better reinforcement for teaching when students listen to what a teacher has to say and students actually do the work and succeed! Mims' students did what she asked of them. They worked hard, and she worked hard for them and with them. Mims listened to what Lockley had to say about action research when Mims was in class. Mims implemented what was taught about action research in relation to what Lockley believed teachers should be doing in their classrooms. Mims believed in what Lockley presented about action research. Mims saw an

issue in her class and found a potential solution, implemented that solution, and monitored to examine if interventions were actually working (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012). Mims' students were positively reinforced to work on their reading skills. Mims reinforced for herself in finding potential solutions to issues and monitor for effectiveness. Lockley was reinforced in continuing to teach the usefulness of action research. There were positive outcomes for Mims, Lockley, and most importantly, Mims' fourth-grade students.

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